

Chief Editor: Dr Chirapat Prapandvidya
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Sanskrit Studies Centre, Office of the President, Silpakorn University,
22 Boromarachachonnani Road, Talingchan, Bangkok 10170 THAILAND
Tel: (66 2) 880 7374 ext 2801 Fax: (66 2) 434 7255
Email address: sanskritstudies@speedpost.net
Website: <http://www.ssc.su.ac.th>

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Faculty of Archaeology
Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Unity in Diversity: Anattā revisited

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya*

I should like to begin my modest paper with a stanza from the epigraphy of the great Buddhist King of Cambodia (ancient Kambuja), which appears to me to be of great significance, providing as it does the metaphysical basis for the King's social activities, among them the foundation of 102 hospitals around the kingdom – hospitals in which people belonging to all the four social classes received medical treatment (*cikitsyā atra catvāro varṇāḥ*). There is a syntactic peculiarity in this stanza, which should not surprise us: though not confined to Buddhist Sanskrit, it is fairly common there:

*anekadhānekajagatsu bhinno
'py ātmaikatā tu sphuṭam asya satyā /
sukhāni duḥkhāni yad ātmabhājām
ātmany adhāt suhṛdaye yadye //*

“Though the *ātman* is divided in various ways in various beings, he has realized its unity in a manifest fashion, since he has taken into his compassionate *ātman* the joys and sorrows of those who participate in the *ātman*”.¹

Coming from one of the sons of the King himself, Prince Sūryakumāra who composed the Ta Prohm inscription of 1186 A.D. (Prince Virakumāra composed the Preah Khan inscription, and Queen Indradevī, the Phimeanakas inscription), this stanza cannot be so easily explained away in the name of Buddhist orthodoxy, as has sometimes been attempted.

We have to do here with Mahāyāna Buddhism, and we do find numerous parallels in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. Among them, I will quote here what strikes me as the closest to this stanza, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* XIV, 37-41:

*saṃskāramātram jagad etya buddhyā
nirātmakaṃ duḥkhavirūḍhimātram /
vihāya yānarthamayātmadṛṣṭiḥ
mahātmadṛṣṭiṃ śrayate mahārthām //*

* Professor Bhattacharya eminent scholar living in Paris.

¹ *BEFEO* VI, p. 53, st. XXV.

*vinātmadr̥ṣṭyā ya ihātmadr̥ṣṭir
vināpi duḥkhena suduḥkhitaś ca /
sarvārthakartā na ca kārakāṅkṣī
yathātmānaḥ svātmahitāni kṛtvā //*

*yo muktacittaḥ parayā vimuktyā
baddhaś ca gāḍhāyatabandhanena /
duḥkhasya paryantam apaśyamānaḥ
prayujyate caiva karoti caiva //*

*svaṃ duḥkham udvoḍhum ihāsamārtho
lokaḥ kutaḥ piṇḍitam anyaduḥkham /
janmaikam ālokayate tv acinto
viparyayāt tasya tu bodhisattvaḥ //*

*yat prema yā vatsalatā prayogaḥ
sattveṣv akhedaś ca jinātmajānāṃ /
āścaryam etat paramaṃ bhaveṣu
na caiva sattvātmāsamānabhāvāt //*

Because of time, I refrain from giving a full translation of this long but beautiful passage with a touch of Buddhist Sanskrit.² What is remarkable in these stanzas is that they bring out the opposition between the view of the little self and the view of the Great Self: the Bodhisattva, rejecting the view of the little self which is without meaning (*anarthamaya*), resorts to the view of the Great Self which has a great meaning (*mahātmadr̥ṣṭiṃ śrayate mahārthām*). Thus, without the view of self, he has the view of Self (*vinātmadr̥ṣṭyā ya ihātmadr̥ṣṭiḥ*). Without sorrow, he is sore afflicted (*vināpi duḥkhena suduḥkhitaś ca*); although with thought delivered by supreme liberation, he is bound by a close and far-reaching bond (*yo muktacittaḥ parayā vimuktyā baddhaś ca gāḍhāyatabandhanena*); he does not see the limit of his pain (*duḥkhasya paryantam apaśyamānaḥ*). ‘The tenderness of the sons of the Victors towards creatures, their love, their occupation, their tirelessness, is the supreme marvel of the worlds! Or rather, No! since other and self are identical to them (*sattvātmāsamānabhāvāt*)’.

Should this text – and so many others! – which emphasize the unity of the Self beyond the wrong view of selves, be considered ‘more Brahmanical than Buddhist’, as some renowned scholars would have it?

² See K. Bhattacharya, *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme ancien* (Paris, 1973), p 38.

By ‘Brahmanical’ these scholars mean especially ‘Upaniṣadic’, without, however, seeing the specificity of the Upaniṣadic conception of *ātman*, according to which the *ātman* is not an individual ego, either identical with the psychophysical constituents of the individual or apart from them: it is not the ‘object of the notion “I”’ (*ahampratyayaviśaya*), to use a later term.

Now, the Buddha’s so-called doctrine of *anattā*, as well as the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *ātman*, was propounded against the background of the opinions current in those days, which identified the *ātman* either with the whole of individuality or with one or other element of it. Thus we read in the Pāli Canon:

*ye hi keci, bhikkhave, samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā
anekavihitaṃ attānāṃ samanupassamānā samanupassanti
sabbe te pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti etesaṃ vā
aññātaraṃ.*³

And from the earliest Upaniṣads we learn how the Asura Virocana (in the *Chāndogya*) goes away content with the conception of *ātman* as the body, while the god Indra (in the *Chāndogya*) and the favourite wife of Yājñavalkya, Maitreyī (in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*), see the *ātman* in the most precious element of individuality, consciousness, and in the cessation of consciousness the destruction of themselves (*vināśam evāpīto bhavati*).⁴

The Upaniṣadic *ātman*, identical with the *brahman*, is not an individual substance, a ‘soul’, but the Being itself, the universal, absolute Consciousness beyond the subject-object split – the transcendent Impersonality which man realizes through the negation of his individuality.

But, while the Upaniṣads placed the emphasis on *ātman* and speculated on it, the Buddha placed it on *anattā*, what is not the *ātman*; for his prime object was liberation:

*seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, mahāsamuddo ekaraso· loṇaraso
evam eva kho, bhikkhave, ayaṃ dhammavinayo ekaraso
vimuttiraso ‘As the ocean has but one flavour, the flavour of
salt, so, monks, this doctrine and this discipline have but one
flavour, the flavour of Deliverance’.*⁵

³ *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* (PTS) III, p. 46.

⁴ *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* VIII, 8; VIII, 11; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* II, 4, 13; IV, 5, 14

⁵ *Cullavagga* IX, 1, 4 (*Vinaya* II, p. 239)

The usual expression of *anattā* in the Pāli Canon is this:

yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā; yad anattā taṃ n'etaṃ mama, n'eso 'ham asmi, na m'eso attā ti evam etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ ‘what is impermanent (*anicca*) is painful (*dukkha*); what is painful is *anattā*; and of what is *anattā* one should understand through right knowledge: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my *ātman*”.⁶

Now, when one is attached to what is painful, namely the constituents of our individuality – the *khandhas/skandhas*, saying: ‘This is mine, I am this, this is my *ātman*’, Can one understand one’s misery and liberate oneself from it? *yo nu kho dukkhaṃ allīno dukkhaṃ upagato dukkhaṃ ajjhosito dukkhaṃ etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā ti samanupassati, api nu kho so sāmaṃ vā dukkhaṃ parijāneyya dukkhaṃ vā parikkhāpetvā vihareyya*.⁷ The answer is, evidently, No!

Furthermore, to seek to know the *ātman* is to make of it an object and thus never to know it in truth. As the great Vedānta philosopher, Śaṅkara, more than a thousand years after the Buddha, said, after a long discussion on the *ātman*’s not being an object (*aviśayatva*), *tasmā jñāne yatno na kartavyaḥ kiṃ tv anātmāny ātmabuddhinivṛttāv eva* ‘Therefore, one should not make an effort for knowledge (of the *ātman*) but only for the cessation of the notion of *ātman* in what is non-*ātman* (*anātman*).⁸

Here, then, is an illustration of the theme of Unity in Diversity. There is no opposition between *ātman* and *anattā*: the difference lies in the emphasis.

There are positive expressions relative to *ātman* in the Pāli Canon: *brahmabhūtena attanā viharati*, and so on.

These expressions can be explained away in some way or other, as they have been by both ancient and modern authors. But it would be hard to explain away the couple of *viññāṇa* passages in the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima-Nikāyas*. They recall the Upaniṣadic doctrine, so much so that V. Trenckner, the editor of the first volume of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, attributed the words of the Buddha to his adversary, at the expense of absurdity, of course.⁹

The Theravāda tradition did not commit any such error; however, in its eagerness to isolate Buddhism from the Upaniṣadic tradition, it largely obscured the issue by considering *viññāṇa* merely as a ‘name for *nibbāna*’ (*nibbānassa nāmaṃ*), in the sense of ‘something to be preeminently known’ or ‘something to be known through a preeminent means’ (*viññātabban ti viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇaṃ ti vijānitabbaṃ; viññāṇaṃ ti vijānitabbaṃ*).¹⁰

In the *Kevaddhasutta* of the *Dīgha-Nikāya* we read:

*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ /
ettha āpo ca pathavī tejo vāyo na gādhati //*

*ettha dīghaṃ ca rassaṇi ca aṇuṇ-thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ /
ettha nāmaṇi ca rūpaṇi ca asesāṃ uparujjhati //*

viññāṇassa nirodhena etth'etaṃ uparujjhati /

There are numerous parallel passages in the Pāli Canon which suggest that *nibbāna* is being spoken of. But here *nibbāna* is called *viññāṇa* ‘infinite and universal’ (*anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ*).

The majority of modern scholars, starting from Eugène Burnouf, the great master of Buddhology in the 19th century, have confused the two *viññāṇas* mentioned in this passage. But on this point, at least, Buddhaghosa is illuminating: the first *viññāṇa*, which is *anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ*, refers to *nibbāna*, while the second is our phenomenal consciousness (*carimāka viññāṇaṃ pi abhisamkharaviññāṇaṃ pi*).¹¹

It is with the cessation of this phenomenal *viññāṇa* that all the empirical realities, including our individuality (*nāmaṇi ca rūpaṇi ca*), cease in the other *viññāṇa* (*viññāṇassa nirodhena etth'etaṃ uparujjhati*).

Does this not recall Yājñavalkya’s teaching in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*, that *ātman* is a ‘homogeneous mass of consciousness without inside and outside’ (*anantaro 'bāhyaḥ kṛtsnaḥ prajñānaghana [vijñānaghana] eva*) and that ‘after Deliverance there is no consciousness’ (*na pretya saṃjñāsti: pretya* here, according to the context means not ‘after death’ but ‘after Deliverance’, as some ancient commentators, among them Śaṅkara’s disciple Sureśvara also

⁶ *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* III, pp. 22-23; etc.

⁷ *Majjhima-Nikāya* (PTS) I, p. 233

⁸ *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XVIII, 50

⁹ See K. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 54, n. 2.

¹⁰ See K. Bhattacharya, *Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism with Special reference to its relation to the Upaniṣads* (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1998), pp. 27-28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26 ff.

saw)? As Śāṅkara makes it perfectly clear, *saṃjñā* here means *viśeṣasaṃjñā* or *viśeṣavijñāna* 'particular (individual) consciousness'.¹²

But while in the Upaniṣads we find long developments of this and other ideas, the Buddha's words are confined to some concise statements. What is this difference due to? The answer, again, is the same as before. As a Japanese scholar, Ryukan Kimura, put it long ago,

From a perusal of such identical expressions as we come across in both [the Pāli texts and the Upaniṣads], we may hold that in a certain sense Buddha's Ontological perception... does not surpass the ideas of the Upaniṣads. But the difference between them is the different way of realization; that is to say, the way of realization of Upaniṣads is philosophical, while Buddha's way is a religious one.¹³

Now, a question is sometimes asked: If the Buddha adopted the ontological position of the Upaniṣads, how could he be the founder of a religion that has been regarded as 'heterodox'? A vain question, in reality, since the division between 'orthodoxy' and 'heterodoxy' is not so rigid in India as it is thought to be. The criterion of 'orthodoxy' in India is the acceptance of the authority of the Veda, and the Upaniṣads, to the extent that they accept that authority, remain 'orthodox'; but, at the same time, in their opposition to the Vedic lore and ritualism, they are on the highway to 'heterodoxy' – so much so that Śāṅkara once exclaimed, citing Manu: *yā vedabāhyāḥ kāś ca kāś ca kudrṣṭayaḥ / sarvās tā niṣphalāḥ pretya tamoniṣṭhā hi tāḥ smṛtāḥ //*

In one of the oldest Upaniṣads, the *Chāndogya* (VII, 1,3), the *ātmanvid* is placed higher than the *mantravid*, and a middle Upaniṣad, the *Muṇḍaka*, where also we encounter for the first time the term *Vedānta* 'end of the Veda' to designate the Upaniṣads, distinctly relegates the Vedic lore to an inferior level by calling it *aparā vidyā* 'inferior science', as opposed to the *parā vidyā* 'superior science' represented by the Upaniṣads. Later Hinduism carries this tendency further: the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scriptures (Āgamas, Saṃhitās) themselves are called the 'root Veda' (*mūlaveda*) – the 'root of the great Veda tree' (*mahato vedavṛkṣasya mūlabhūtaḥ*), of which the R̥gveda and others represent the trunk and branches (*skandhabhūtā ṛgādyās te śākhābhūtās tathā*).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³ R. Kimura, *A Historical Study of the terms Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna and the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (University of Calcutta, 1927), p. 97, n. 2.

Neither the Buddha nor Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, adopted these procedures. They do depend, in their teachings, 'on the traditional typology, while the orientation is entirely different' – to borrow an expression of Jean Daniélou, in an entirely different branch of history of religions. But they totally rejected the authority of the Veda. Herein lies the border line between 'orthodoxy and heterodoxy'¹⁴ – a further illustration of 'unity in diversity'.

Śrūtayo

¹⁴ On all this see K. Bhattacharya, 'The Criterion of Orthodoxy in India and the Case of Jainism and Buddhism', in *Śramaṇa-Vidyā, Studies in Buddhism: Professor Jagannath Upadhyaya Commemoration Volume I* (Sarnath, 1987), pp. 101-109.